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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000005

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM IZ

SUBJECT: THE CHRISTIANS IN BASRAH - SHOULD WE STAY OR SHOULD WE GO?

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (C) Summary: Christians are a small minority in Iraq, about 2 percent of Iraq's 26 million, and are sometimes lost in the larger Iraqi sectarian schisms. Deputy Regional Coordinator (DRC) met separately with the leaders and members of the three largest Christian groups in Basrah; the Chaldean Christians, the Assyrian Christians and the Armenian Orthodox in order to assess the current relationships of the respective groups with the Muslim community. Although the initial conversations conveyed a sense of normalcy and "business as usual" for Christians living in Basrah, there was an underlying sense that the Christian groups were feeling the pressure of living in the post-Saddam Basrah community. End summary.
Chaldean Christians

2. (C) The DRC met with Gabriel T. Kassab, Archbishop of Basrah, at his church and place of residence in downtown Basrah. The Archbishop stated that he is the leader of the Chaldean Catholics, Syrian Catholics and Latin Catholics numbering around 3500 in Basrah. He is responsible for ten Catholic churches in Basrah, only two of which have priests and are still operating. Most of the priests fled after being threatened in the last two years and have not returned. The Archbishop stated that he too received many threats and extortion letters after the fall of Saddam, but made the decision to pay one particular group for protection and has done so ever since. However, he added that he now regrets that decision.

3. (C) The Archbishop described how his church operates three kindergartens totaling 450 children with six nuns as well as a youth center, a bible study group and an orphanage. He stated that 90 percent of the children in the kindergarten and youth center are Muslim. In addition, his church distributes free food and medicine to anyone who asks and oversees 14 charity projects throughout the city. The Archbishop stated that it is important to show the Muslim community that the Christian churches contribute to the well being of the entire population, regardless of religion.

4. (C) Despite his efforts, however, the Archbishop admitted that times have been tough for Christians. He stated that in the period immediately after the war, about a dozen Christians were killed by Shia groups who were determined to have all Christian liquor stores and nightclubs closed. He mentioned that even today, Christian women in particular are harassed in public and made to wear the veil. He attributes the negative attitude towards Christians to the Iranians that have come into Basrah. The Archbishop stated that he has met with the Governor of Basrah regarding the harassment and the fact that the City of Basrah does not employ Christians. The Governor, however, has not taken any action. The Archbishop has also met with other political leaders in an effort to find a way his Christian community can continue to live in peace among the Muslims.
Assyrian Christians

5. (C) The DRC met with Father Sulaqah and the Deacon, Yacub Youssuf, of the Assyrian Christian Church at the Regional Embassy Office. Father Sulaqah, who has been in Basrah for 15 years, had declined the DRC's offer to visit him at his church stating that it would bring too much attention to his community. He stated that the Assyrian Christians have two churches in Basrah, but had to close one when about 120 Assyrian Christians left last year mostly for other parts of Iraq because of the unstable security situation. He added that in the period following the fall of Saddam, seven people from his church were killed and a number of others were threatened with death if they did not leave or pay money for "protection." Father Sulaqah stated that there are currently about 390 Assyrian Christians left in Basrah.

6. (C) The Deacon mentioned that Assyrian Christians continue to be targets for kidnappings and threats. He stated that they are seen as easy prey and most vulnerable because they have no tribe to protect them. He also added that there are lists of who to target for kidnappings and extortion that come from Iran. The Deacon stated that one group in particular, Thar'allah, is well known for receiving their instructions from Iran on who to target. Father Sulaqah mentioned that he has gone to see the Governor of Basrah to complain of the mistreatment of the Assyrian Christians, but so far the Governor has not taken any action.
Armenian Orthodox

17. (C) The head of the Armenian Orthodox church fled to Baghdad in September of 2005 when he and his family received direct threats. As a result, the DRC met with several members of the Armenian Orthodox church numbering around 150 in Basrah all of whom lamented the fact that they no longer had a priest. For Christmas mass celebrations, the Armenian Orthodox church in Baghdad sent a priest to Basrah for several days. However, the main church of the Armenian Orthodox is in disrepair from lack of money needed for renovations. As a result, the church members meet in a small building in a Christian cemetery

18. (C) According to the members the DRC spoke with, all the Armenian Christians have felt some sort of pressure from their Muslim neighbors since the fall of Saddam. Most of the members of the church have family members, women in particular, who are constantly harassed when they go out in public. Some of them have sent their sons and daughters out of Iraq to Western Europe. In addition, the church used to have a large Armenian Orthodox Club that encompassed a large tract of land with a soccer field and several clubhouses. However, in the period after the war, the area was occupied by homeless Muslim families who have since made it their place of residence. Several members of the Armenian Orthodox church have tried to see the Governor of Basrah in order to get the Muslim families evicted and their club reinstated, but he has refused to see them.

Comment

19. (C) The Christian groups in Basrah have been through some rough times especially the period immediately following the fall of Saddam. They have been singled out not only because they are Christian, but because they cannot fall back on the protection of any tribe or group. In addition, a number of Christians believe they have been targeted because they operated lucrative alcohol stores that have since been taken over by Muslims. For all these reason, there has been a steadily dwindling of Christians in Basrah since 2003. Some have fled to other parts of Iraq, but others have left the country. However, those that still remain are hopeful that "this too shall pass," and they will be able to live peacefully with their Muslim neighbors as they have been doing for centuries.

MARRANO